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ABSTRACT

This paper probes for reasons of student discontent with current language instruction and suggests general educational objectives for all levels of instruction. The author comments on these areas of concern: educational relevance, foreign language requirements, educational objectives, native speakers, individualizing instruction, utilization of classroom time, literature, cross-cultural study, and improvement of basic skills. (RL)

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DONALD D. WALSH

Teaching Foreign Languages to a Non-Captive Audience

The non-captive audience is presumably a free audience, free to leave the foreign-language classroom, free to elect or reject a foreign language.* Leaving the classroom may be good or bad. Maybe not all foreign-language learning should be confined to the classroom. Maybe the classroom should not even be a room, not even have walls. Maybe the school should be an open, wall-less school. Maybe the foreign-language student can and should do much of his studying by himself or with a mechanical instead of a human aid.

On the other hand, maybe the reason that the foreign-language student wants out is because he has not found his foreign-language experience rewarding, not relevant. Some teachers react violently to the word 'relevance.' They find it abhorrent. I do not. I do not find irrelevance an attractive educational goal. I think that all his learning should be relevant to the development of the student.

I taught for many years in independent secondary schools, which are usually called 'prep' schools. And ~~xxx~~ I never felt at ease with this adjective. It implied that the school experience had no validity of its own, that its justification was that it was preparing for the college experience. Now four teen-age years, or even one such year, or even one month, are not a mere preparation for life, or for future education, or for a successful career, or for anything else. They are in themselves an important and significant segment of life, important and significant because every moment of life is important and significant. And every moment of education should contribute to this importance, to this significance, to this relevance.

Many foreign-language teachers are alarmed at the dropping or shrinking of language requirements. Some of this alarm is justified. Cuts in language requirements are a response to pressures from two sources: the administration and

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the students. School administrators--or, to be fair, some school administrators--are opposed to foreign-language study, or at least are reluctant to support it vigorously, because it can not be neatly packaged into lecture courses, each with one lecturer and twenty-five or fifty note-takers. We foreign-language teachers are demanding. We say that language learning improves as the teacher-pupil ratio approaches one-to-one. We say that the teacher ought to be a model fit to imitate, and that if he is not, he must supply a substitute model, live or canned. We say that the language laboratory should be thought of as a language-practice library, open for individual study on the same basis and for as many hours as the book library.

The other pressure against foreign-language requirements is pressure from the students, who are opposed to any kind of course requirements. In the face of this pressure, foreign-language teachers should feel no more guilt than do teachers of any other subject whose students are not required to and do not choose to study it. They merely share in the common guilt.

Some teachers feel no guilt at all at the desertion of masses of foreign-language students. They welcome miniscule classes of dedicated students. With Henry the Fifth at the battle of Agincourt, they say: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers." Of course in many schools the 'happy few' may be too few to allow the miniscule class to be offered at all. This is a consequence not always visible from the ivory tower. But even if a generous administration allows a few 'happy few' courses to be offered, we language teachers ought not to be content. We ought to be aiming to teach not the 'happy few' but the happy multitudes.

What should be our goals for foreign-language instruction? What can we reasonably expect our students to accomplish? And, more important, what can they reasonably expect of themselves? The learning should certainly include some control over the four language skills. It should include some acquaintance with

the culture of the country or countries, the deep culture, the small-c culture. And it should include some acquaintance with the literature, doubly valuable if literary knowledge reinforces knowledge of the culture.

Learning a language is learning a skill. It has more in common with learning to play a musical instrument or learning to paint or learning to write creatively than it does with learning history or literature or science. It is not something that the student hears about or reads about; it is something that he does. This differentiation places special demands upon the language teacher as it does upon the teacher of music or art. These teachers must teach by performing. They must be models of the skills that they teach, or, if they can not themselves be models, they must be able to supply models. In the case of the foreign-language teacher the models can be discs or tapes of authentic language speech. It takes a good deal of modesty for a foreign-language teacher who knows that he is not a good model to tell his class to imitate not him but the disc or tape. But pity the class whose linguistically handicapped teacher either does not know that he is inadequate or refuses to acknowledge the inadequacy! Another source of authentic native speech is, of course, an authentic native. We should seek out such resource persons in our community. They may be eager to help, and their authenticity is not just linguistic. They are living proof that real people speak and live this language and this culture. They can, for example, not only talk German but talk about Germany or Austria or German Switzerland. If we have introduced our students with discernment to a language and its culture, their interest and enthusiasm and their sense of relevance will be heightened by periodic contact with natives of this culture. Search hard for such natives. They are worthy of the search.

But our first responsibility is to improve ourselves as models. And that

means going back periodically to immerse ourselves in the language and culture that we teach. We should try to get financial support for this foreign study, but if we can't we should pay for it ourselves because such periodic refreshing is essential to our professsional competence.

If we are to teach a foreign language (or anything else) successfully we must recognize the individuality of the learner. Students learn in different ways and at different speeds. At the start of any course beyond the beginners level we must try to ascertain not how many years each student has been studying the language but how much he has learned in those years and how much of what kinds of language he has learned. We must stop equating one year of learning time with one year of credits. We must do everything possible to let the student do much of his learning at his own pace. For language acquisition is skill acquisition. And people acquire skills at individual speeds. And students are people, younger than other people, less privileged than other people, but still people. And people who are acquiring any skill--music, art, writing, foreign language--must be allowed to pace themselves. Courses must be planned in such a way that lock-step learning is eliminated, or at least minimized.

Using native speakers of a language as models is team teaching in a way. Even if there are no native speakers accessible, teachers can expose their students to a variety of accents by swapping classes, or even terms, of the course. A student tends to equate the sound of the foreign language with the sound of his teacher's voice. We must give each student the experience of a variety of voices and accents, not for him to imitate, but for him to recognize. In addition to team teaching there is team learning, getting the advanced student to help the less advanced student, the quick learner to help the slow learner, the native speaker in the class to help the others. Nothing so strengthens and solidifies one's knowledge of a subject as teaching it to another learner or to a group of learners.

The teacher's time should be viewed as a precious commodity in very limited supply. It should never be spent on tasks that can be performed by the student alone, or by the student reinforced by some aid other than the teacher. Exposition and explanation of rules is in general the function of the textbook. Reading is a solitary task, a book and a student. Most listening practice is also a solitary task, a tape or disc and a student. The teacher should reserve or preserve his student cantacts for communication in the foreign language. And if the teacher does not have to dissipate his time on chores that can be performed without his presence, he can devote all or nearly all his time to really small conversation groups of three to five students.

The analogy with the other skills is illuminating. We would think it an absurd waste of the music teacher's time if he were to sit beside the music student as he practiced his scales or his piece, or if the art teacher were to stand beside the easel as the student applied each stroke to his painting, or if the teacher of creative writing had to witness the creation of each sentence. And of course this doesn't happen. The student does his music practice or his painting or his creative writing largely by himself. Periodically, perhaps once a week, he has a private or small-group consultation with the teacher, who evaluates what he has accomplished and charts for him the next stage in his progress. And so it should be with the language teacher. The student should report to him once or twice a week for conversation practice so that his progress can be checked and new assignments given him. If it is necessary occasionally for the teacher to explain a new grammatical construction, he can do this in a joint session attended by all students who are, at that point, ready for the new topic. These small groups and large joint sessions may complicate the schedule, but schedule makers can and should rise to the challenge.

Much of the extramural learning of listening and speaking should occur in the language laboratory, which is unfortunately named. It should have been ~~it~~ called something like an audiolingual language library. Like the other libraries it is a plaᵴe for individual learning, not group learning. It would be ~~ba~~surd to send a whole class to the library to read in a book for one or two periods a week. Absurd because some students read faster and better than others. So in a language library some students learn to hear and speak better and faster than others. The language library assignments should therefore be not so many hours per week but so much accomplishment per week. For some students this may mean one hour, for others two or three. The language library must be made available for individual study exactly like the book library. And it should be open just as many hours a week.

The four language skills have traditionally been divided into reading and writing on the one hand, and listening and speaking on the other. There is another, more logical grouping: the two active skills, speaking and writing, and the two passive skills, listening and reading. Some foreign-language teaching errs by placing too much emphasis on speaking and writing. ~~Thxxx~~ The student of a foreign language is largely a receiver and not a producer of the language. A weakness of some audiolingual courses is that they equate listening and speaking, so that the student is expected to be able to say everything that he can understand when he hears it spoken. This equating is a fallacy even in a person's native language. We all know that our passive vocabulary is much greater than our active vocabulary. We readily understand words, phrases, structures that we would never use ourselves. The difference between active and passive control is even greater in the case of a foreign language, where the active is usually confined to a carefully phrased and timed question, while the passive

involves us in trying to understand the flood of words that pour out in answer to the question. Some audiolingual courses teach the student to send language as fluently as he receives it. In fact, he needs a great deal of extra practice in receiving. In his contacts with the foreign country, he will be taking in information, not giving it out, he will be listening to films and plays, not acting in them, he will be reading newspapers, magazines, and books, not writing them. When ~~the~~ students say that the teacher talks too fast, the ~~xxx~~ answer should be that the students listen too slow. The foreign-language learner needs an enormous amount of listening practice. He must not sit back and listen but sit up and listen, because it is hard work, exhausting work. His ears and his mind should be worn out after a half-hour of it. But it is far better for him to cope with the problem during his domestic study than to wait until he goes abroad to discover how little he can understand. You may remember that Heywood Broun once said that in school he mastered basic French but when he got to Paris he found out that the French didn't speak basic French.

A moment ago I spoke of the need to expose the student to a variety of accents. This is just as important for the student whose teacher speaks the language well as for the student whose teacher is not a good model. Even if the teacher speaks like a native, the student should have the opportunity to hear other natives, or others who speak like natives, natives of the other sex and from other regions of the language area.

The importance of being able to understand as well as speak is illustrated by a story that Stanley Sapon told me years ago. A man came to the United States who didn't know ~~any~~ a word of English. A friend taught him to say: "Apple pie and coffee." He went into a restaurant, spoke his sentence, and got food. He communicated! Marvellous! But then he got tired of apple pie and coffee,

So he asked his friend to teach him something else. That evening he trotted off to the restaurant. "Ham sandwich!" "White or rye?" "Ham sandwich!" "What kinda bread you want?" "Ham sandwich!!" "I hearja, but whatja want it on?" "Ham sandwich!!!" "Look, bud, I heardja. I got ears.You want white bread, whole wheat, cracked wheat, graham, pumpernickel?" . . . . "Apple pie and coffee."

Reading was once thought to be the most important skill and it is still a major objective of language learning to be able to read with ease and understanding and without conscious translation. But what students read in the foreign language may turn them on or it may turn them off. They want to read about the foreign people. They want to know in what ways foreign students are like them and in what ways they are different. This kind of reading can be made attractive and relevant to our students if the language curtain is not too think, that is, if the linguistic obstacles to understanding are not too great.

Most of us foreign-language teachers majored in college in the foreign literature. That was the only major offered in a foreign language until quite recently. Foreign-language majors therefore either got a heavy dose of the foreign literature or we shifted to some other major. And those of us who didn't switch developed a love for literature. Now there is nothing wrong with a love for literature. And there is nothing sinful about wanting to share with our students this love. But if we take it for granted that all students in a foreign-language class ~~are thereby~~ are, by virtue of being in that class, that they in love with literature--or even know what literature is in any language, including English--we are floundering in misconceptions. The student of French may be interested in French literature, but he is just as likely to be interested in one of the sciences or in art or music or mathematics. Books on these subjects have been written in French, and the enterprising teacher of French can discover the special interests of his students and assign them readings in these fields, using or adding to the French books in the library. Such

individualized reading will be much more relevant and rewarding than Colomba or Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon. It will also, of course, mean much more work for the teacher, because he will have to at least browse in all the books that all his students are reading in order to be able to evaluate their progress.

Cross-cultural contrasts are being made all the time in the foreign-language class. The foreign-language teacher, ready or not, is the interpreter of the foreign culture. And the students are eager to discuss the culture and the people. This is one of the main reasons for their study of the language. For most of the long, long time that foreign languages have been studied in this country, most foreign-language teachers have been operating in the dark when discussing cultural contrasts. They have created stereotypes and they have made sweeping and wildly inaccurate generalizations. These generalizations their students have dutifully copied down and learned.

Recently a guide for the bewildered cultural expert has appeared. As many of you know, the 1972 Northeast Conference's theme was Other Words, Other Worlds: Language-in-Culture. The Reports of the Working Committees described the nature of culture and specifically contrasted the culture of the United States with those of France, French Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Ancient Rome and Greece, the Soviet Union, Spain, and Spanish America. Each of these ~~ten~~ nine Reports has a list of suggested readings for the teacher. The Reports of the Conference may be obtained through the Modern Language Association Materials Center at 62 Fifth Avenue, New York 10011. They cost $4.25.

In the foreign-language class, writing can mean many things, all the way from simple copying of written or spoken phrases up to free composition. As soon as the sound system has been reasonably mastered, copying of printed phrases is a useful exercise in spelling and syntax. Copying of the spoken language will give the student practice in distinguishing between the spoken and the written language.

These are useful exercises and they should be a part of any elementary language class. At some point we should ask the student to begin to create his own phrases. But here we teachers should beware. We ought to devise exercises, or choose text/books that contain exercises, that will lead the student gently but persistently along the path of increasing self-confidence in language production. We should not set up traps into which the student will be tempted to fall. Some of us who have been teaching for decades will remember the sentences lovingly confected by crafty grammarians, such as: "If Professor González had known that Doctor Gómez was going to leave, with several friends of his, for Southern Spain on Tuesday, October 14, 1963, at a quarter of twelve P.M., he would have asked him to take Peter, his oldest son, with him." A lovely sentence, with twenty-two traps in it! And great was the teacher's joy when he saw that most of the students had fallen into most of the traps. In those days the teacher's success seemed to increase as the success of his students decreased.

We know better now. In the spoken language as well as in the written language we should give the student models to imitate, at first exactly, then with minimal variations, and then with recombinations until he is capable of making a great number of meaningful and correct utterances in the language. He is communicating, leading from the strength of having mastered a large number of phrases that he can put together automatically, without hesitation. Now this is a very exciting and rewarding activity. It is relevant to the student's desires, and it gives him a sense of accomplishment and liberation.

We have said several times that language learning is an activity. In fact, all learning is an activity. Learning is therefore more important than being taught. Team learning is more important than team teaching. And students who have been permitted to learn a language actively will not feel that they are part of a captive audience, or of any audience at all. They will be actors in the act of language learning, a very exciting act.